

Faith Matters: Miraculous comeback cause for jubilation

Revived inner-city Catholic schools bring hope

By David Waters

Saturday, April 23, 2011

The new superintendent of Catholic Schools in Memphis attended a Papal Mass in Rome in 1999. She thought she would be among thousands.

Instead, Dr. Mary McDonald found herself seated just a few feet from Pope John Paul II, thanks to her brother who worked as an attorney for a seminary in Rome.

After the Mass, she met the pope and gave him something she had intended to give her brother: a yellow Memphis Catholic Schools T-shirt.

"I asked the pope to pray for our schools," McDonald said. "I told him we needed his prayers because we didn't know what to do about them."

The pope didn't put the shirt on. But he did tell McDonald that he would pray for the Memphis schools.

At the time, the schools needed all the prayers they could get. Middle-class flight and urban blight were strangling Catholic education in Memphis.

In the mid-1960s, the diocese operated the state's 10th-largest school district with 11,000 students in two dozen schools. By the late 1990s, there were half as many students in 16 schools -- and five were a year from closing.

Exactly one month after the pope said he would pray for Memphis Catholic schools, McDonald got a phone call from two local businessmen, both Protestants. They told her they wanted to help the diocese revive Catholic education in inner-city Memphis.

Their multimillion-dollar donation, given anonymously, allowed the diocese to reopen six inner-city schools. (Read more about the donors [in Sunday's Viewpoint section](#).)

"I wanted to call them Resurrection Schools, but we already had a Resurrection parish," McDonald said.

The schools were reopening at the beginning of the Third Millennium of Christianity -- what Pope John Paul II was calling the Great Jubilee Year of 2000. So Bishop J. Terry Steib suggested calling them Jubilee Schools.

The story of the Jubilee Schools in Memphis is a story of faith, hope and love, death and resurrection.

In other words, it's an Easter story.

One of those stories is at St. John Catholic School on Lamar, which educated thousands of students over four decades before it closed because of low enrollment in 1990.

"That was a sad day," said Ron Childers, Action News 5 weatherman who attended St. John in the early 1970s. "It was more than just a school and church; it was a close-knit community that extended well beyond its geographical boundaries. My years there instilled a true sense of family and community."

Childers is Catholic. So were most of his St. John classmates and their families. Today, more than 80 percent of the 1,400 students who attend Jubilee Schools are not Catholic.

Shirley McKay, who sends her non-Catholic grandchildren to St. John, doesn't care whether they pass a cross or a crucifix in the hallway, as long as Jesus is with them. She was awarded custody of the kids after their father was shot and killed in an apparent robbery in South Memphis in 2006.

"I needed these children to have a religious upbringing," McKay said. "When they leave here, there's a world of evil."

Faculty and staff at St. John meet evil with love.

Faculty meetings often begin with the Prayer of St. Francis, which sixth-grade students memorize. The students also have daily prayers and religious instruction and weekly Mass. Students who aren't Catholic receive a blessing instead of a wafer.

"Many of our students face the challenges that come from poverty, but they don't come into the school with bitterness or anger," said Kristi Baird, who was a teacher at St. John before becoming principal last year. "They know this is a place where they are safe, loved, and where their needs will be met."

Nearly all of the students receive tuition support. All families pay something, but some pay as little as \$10 a month. McKay works a lot of overtime for the U.S. Postal Service to cover her monthly payments, which are substantially more.

The schools also provide all students who need them with uniforms, daily hot breakfasts and lunches, weekend snack packs, Thanksgiving and Christmas food baskets, health screenings, as well as parenting workshops and job-skills programs.

"The Catholics, I've learned, they take their mission very seriously," McKay said. "They don't proselytize, but they are convicted. If a child has a need, they meet it. If the family has a need, they meet it."